

# Whose World?

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[ 0 : 00 ] If you would take your Bibles and open them to Exodus chapter 9, 10, page 54. We like to put little intervals of silence in our service for you to use as times of meditation, like at the end of the offertory.

So I want you to use those times to meditate and just be quiet. We touched down today in the middle of a really difficult section of the Bible, the end of the ten plagues.

Last week Dan started with a few of them. I have five to nine today and I'm not going to touch the Passover, the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, and I'm not going to do it next week at the Cantata, you'll be pleased to know.

In fact, it's going to be two weeks and I've asked someone else to preach on it. The problem with looking at the plagues is that it's easy to get the wrong idea about God, who he is and what he's doing.

Looking at the plagues is a little bit like looking at someone in a boat going backwards. If you step back and you realise that person is actually rowing the boat, then it makes sense.

[ 1 : 18 ] And until we step back and we see that the Exodus is actually about God saving and redeeming and delivering his people, the plagues don't make any sense whatsoever.

In fact, they look backwards. Because whenever God acts in judgement, it creates a problem for us. Not just because it disturbs our safe, domesticated, middle class view of God, but because judgement, hear me, judgement is never the deepest and fundamental purpose of God.

From the beginning of creation, God's purpose is blessing, to draw us into friendship with himself. When he created Adam and Eve in the garden, you remember the word blessing, blessing, blessing, continued to occur.

When God calls Abraham to himself, it is, he says to Abraham, I'm going to bless you five times he says it. I'm going to bless all the families of the earth through you. And everyone who blesses you will be blessed.

And everyone who curses you will be cursed. So salvation, God's work of blessing and bringing us into his friendship and into his presence, takes place, it's God's fundamental purpose, but it happens through judgement.

[ 2 : 36 ] And judgement may be real, but it is God's strange work. Do you know, later on in the book of Isaiah, we read, judgement is my alien work.

It's my strange work. It's foreign to his deepest purpose, which is bringing about his own glory through saving us. So you see, when we come to these plagues, we must take joy in the right thing. There's a lot of sadness in the text here. Yes, everything that God does is perfect in justice and beautiful in righteousness, but we've got to see that his great desire is to bring blessing, to bring us into salvation through judgement.

And God is so resolute, he's so decided to bring us to salvation, that everything that gets in the way, that everything that gets in the way, receives his judgement.

And Pharaoh has made an art form of cursing the people of God, despite God's blessing. He enslaves the people of God with brutal power.

[ 3 : 43 ] He takes their children and kills them, tries to commit genocide, or at least Holocaust.

And then with a tremendous and callous cruelty, he doubles their slavery and their oppression. And the question is, why does God respond with ten plagues?

Why doesn't God just go, and zoom the people off to the land of Canaan? In the passage that was read for us, we have something of the answer. In chapter 9, verses 13 to 16, I just want to read these verses to remind you.

The Lord said to Moses, and here we are, this is the seventh plague out of ten. Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh and say to him, thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, let my people go that they may serve me.

We're familiar with this. God says, this time, I will send all my plagues upon your heart and upon your servants and your people that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth.

[ 4 : 53 ] By now I could have put forth my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence. You would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose have I let you live, to show you my power, so that my name may be declared throughout all the earth.

Do you remember when Moses first came to Pharaoh with God's word saying, let my people go? Remember what Pharaoh said, chapter 5, verse 2? He said, who is this Lord that I should listen to him?

I don't know any Lord. And so the plagues are a kind of a, it's kind of a theological seminary for Pharaoh and for Egypt and for the world.

And the reason God sends the plagues is to reveal himself so that we will know that he is the Lord and that his name will be declared throughout all the world. He's the only living and true God and every other God is just an invention of the human imagination.

So why the plagues? What are the plagues doing? And I just, I want to say three things, three pegs that we can hang our understanding on how God is revealing himself.

[ 6 : 06 ] And the first is this, that this is a cosmic conflict, a cosmic contest. This week I finally succeeded in going to a video store and getting the DVD, The Prince of Egypt.

It's a great, it's an animated film put out by DreamWorks. And I would have to say that it got the main point of Exodus exactly wrong, but it has some brilliant touches in it.

Ever notice, have you ever noticed that about Hollywood films? I saw Evan Almighty on a plane recently and it got the Noah's Ark, it got the main message exactly wrong, but there was some brilliant stuff in it, wasn't there?

Well, in The Prince of Egypt, when Moses first comes into Pharaoh's presence and demands that he let the people go, God says to Moses, lay down your staff, it becomes a snake, and it does. And then the magicians appear in this cartoon and sort of Pharaoh takes a backward step and the magicians start to conjure up their arts and they begin to sing a song to Moses and the beginning of the song goes like this, you're playing with the big boys now.

[ 7 : 26 ] And I thought, exactly, that's exactly right. Because in Egypt and in the ancient pagan world, the gods were not the most powerful spiritual forces.

There was something much more strong than the gods. It was the power of magic to which all gods and all humans had to bow. So, the magicians are like the Egyptian clergy and for the first couple of plagues by some dark and demonic force, I believe, they are able to emulate the miracles that God does through Moses.

The only problem is that when they do the miracles, they make things worse. I think Dan pointed this out. They make the Nile into blood. Sorry, Moses makes the Nile into blood.

The Egyptians come along, the magicians come along and they say, we can make blood as well. But they can't turn it back into water. In the plague of frogs, the land is covered with frogs.

They're frogs. The frogs are coming out of the noses and mouths of the people and the magicians say, yes, we can make frogs as well. And they do, but they don't take the frogs away. But by the time we come to the miracle of the gnats, the magicians say, there is something greater here than all our magic.

[ 8 : 41 ] They say, it is the finger of God. From here on, they don't even try and match Moses. And the last time we meet the magicians is in the sixth plague, covered with boils and sores, a very sorry picture because they can't even protect their own bodies from this God of Israel.

And you see, the plagues grow in intensity from something inconvenient to something terribly debilitating to death itself because with each plague, God dethrones an Egyptian deity.

That's why the snake is used in the rod of God. Snakes were the symbol of royal power. Pharaoh wore a cobra on his head. And the fact that he changed his staff into the snake was deeply offensive to everyone who believed in the power of Pharaoh.

And the fact that his snake swallowed up the magicians' snakes is even more offensive. Actually, there's two great swallows in the book of, swallowed, the verb, in the book of Exodus, not birds.

One is where Moses' snake swallows up their snake. And then in chapter 15, the Egyptian army is swallowed by the Red Sea. Two great gulps around the ten plagues.

[10:05] And the real contest here, you see, is not between Moses and Pharaoh. It's not between the people of Israel and the people of Egypt.

It is between God, the Lord, and all the other gods of Egypt, and every power that claims our allegiance and enslaves us. The Nile was worshipped as the great God, Happy.

I read a hymn this week to the Nile. It's just like the hymns we sing. Provider of good, Lord of sustenance, giver of life, it's dethroned by God. The frog goddess, the goddess of fertility, dethroned by God the Lord.

And when we come to the ninth plague, it's very interesting. We didn't read this, but just turn over to chapter 10, verse 21 to 23.

Just read these three verses. Then the Lord said to Moses, this is the ninth plague, Stretch out your hand toward heaven that there may be a darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.

[11:11] So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven. There was a thick, a deep, thick darkness in all the land of Egypt, three days. They did not see one another, nor did any rise from his place in three days.

But all the people of Israel had light where they dwelt. This is no ordinary darkness. It's not an eclipse. It was a darkness that you could feel.

It physically pressed in on the people. They couldn't move. They couldn't get up to light a candle in their houses. Question. Who is the chief Egyptian deity?

The sun god. Amon Ra. That's right. The creator and sustainer. Why is God doing this? It is because we must know that there is none on earth like him.

That he is God alone. And God doesn't do these things to demonstrate his power to himself. He does it for us. Because part of our salvation is God bringing us through all these obstacles.

[12:17] And he will dethrone every god that we raise in our life. And he will free us from every servitude and every slavery that we worship in the place of God. And God is not going to rest.

This is how he works with us today. He is not going to rest until he dethrones every idol we set up. So it's a cosmic contest. That's the first point.

Secondly, God's purpose in the plagues is a missionary purpose. It's a missionary purpose. Ever wondered why God warns the Egyptians before each plague?

He's not trying to show himself to be a clever God. It is so in the process of saving Israel, he may save Egypt.

In chapter 9, verse 20, in the seventh plague, some of Pharaoh's servants have begun to believe in the Lord. And in chapter 12, when Israel finally leaves the land, you know who goes with them?

[13:19] A great multitude of Egyptians who have come to know that God is the Lord of all the earth. I think that's why there are ten plagues. God is not just trying to dismantle the Egyptian deities.

He's trying to keep the door open for salvation for the Egyptians. He's giving every possible opportunity. Did you notice in verse 14 of chapter 9, that God does not even decide to send all his plagues until this seventh plague.

In verse 14, he says, I'm going to send all my plagues upon you, your heart. It's grace. Even in judgment, there is grace. God holds back his just judgment on Pharaoh and on Egypt, giving every opportunity for repentance.

But Pharaoh hardens his heart. And last week, Dan promised that I was going to preach on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, and I'm not. That's a wonderful and very searching topic, but we don't have time to do it today.

But I do want to point to you, point out to you, that God gives all of us a time of grace, a period of grace where we might come to him and repent before him.

[14:38] And he calls on all of us to repent and to come to him. But I need to tell you that here in the rest of the scriptures teach, this time of grace will not last forever. And if God is calling you to come to him and you resist him and continue to resist his call, the door will close and it will be closed forever.

God has a missionary purpose in these plagues. He says in chapter 9, 16, that my name might be declared throughout the world. And that is why after we get out of Egypt and we come to Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, the priest of Midian, do you know what he says?

He says, Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods because he delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians when they dealt arrogantly with him. And later on when they go into the land, the Gibeonites come and try and make a deal with Israel and they say, From a far country we have come because the name of the Lord your God we've heard a report of him and all that he did in Egypt.

And later on the Philistines with the ark they say the same sort of thing. Because the plagues are not just a cosmic conflict, the plagues have a missionary purpose. And thirdly and finally, the plagues in Egypt are a rehearsal for the final judgment.

Now we saw a couple of weeks ago you remember that the rescue and the deliverance and the salvation of God's people from slavery is a rehearsal of the great salvation that we look forward to.

[16:16] But the plagues are also a rehearsal of that final day of judgment when all evil will be overturned. And I want you if you do have your Bibles open to turn right to the back to Revelation chapter 16.

2, 3, 7. Revelation chapter 16 is a picture of the end of the world. And the way God reveals the end of the world is that there are seven angels with seven bowls full of the wrath of God and what is in the bowls are the plagues of Egypt.

Not the literal and physical plagues. There is spiritual reality to which the plagues point. So if you cast your eye down verse 2 the first bowl is a plague of boils.

the second and third bowls are the sea and rivers turning to blood. In verse 10 the fifth is darkness. Verse 13 the sixth is false spirits like frogs.

And the seventh in verse 21 is a plague of hail. Amazing chapter. And what it tells us is that history is moving toward the final day when God will judge the world in righteousness by the man Christ Jesus.

[17:38] And in verse 7 it's very interesting there is this cry in verse 7 which says yes Lord God the Almighty true and just are your judgments.

And that is the chorus that will be sung on that final day by all in heaven and all on earth and all in hell they will say just and true are your judgments. That is the day when God will vindicate his absolute and beautiful righteousness.

We don't see it all now but we will then. And it's very interesting in chapter 16 verse 5 the only word that sorry 16:15 the only word that Jesus speaks in the whole chapter is a word of blessing.

Even the judgment is in service of salvation. Now I think we deal very poorly with judgment don't we?

On the one side there are people who seem to relish the terrifying and lurid pictures of judgment. You know the sweaty tele-evangelist.

[18:46] I don't think there are many of you here who I think on the other side we are far too sophisticated caring and compassionate to even mention it. It's a kind of a taboo subject amongst polite people isn't it?

And it makes God seem less compassionate than we are. And I think it's partly because of that difficulty and partly because we're so prone to wobble on this issue that the Bible writers deal with it constantly constantly.

When Adam and Eve sin in the Garden of Eden God judges them and expels them from the Garden. when the world in Noah's day rises up in rebellion against God God sends a watery judgment and here in the book of Exodus God is giving a foretaste of that final day when he will bring the final judgment.

I mean just think of the last three plagues the hail and the darkness and the death of the firstborn. Destruction darkness and death. They are pictures of hell.

And some people say to me if there is a hell I'm happy to go because all my friends will be there. Do you ever hear that?

[20:00] I hear that all the time. We have to say that Jesus says no that the picture of darkness and separation and death and destruction is not a place of friendship. And when we come to the New Testament we don't find the picture of judgment falling into the background if anything it's emphasized and intensified.

The New Testament proclaims the certainty of a coming day of universal judgment. Do you remember when the apostle Peter is preaching to Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 he says to Cornelius this is what Jesus commanded us to preach that he has appointed Jesus Christ as the judge of the

living and the dead.

That's the heart of the gospel message to Peter. And then when Paul goes to the University of Athens and the philosophy department up on the Areopagus he summarizes his message by saying God has appointed a day on which he will judge the world through the man Christ Jesus and he's given proof by raising him from the dead.

Or when Paul is writing his letter to the Romans he says that day according to my gospel when God will judge the secrets of all by Christ Jesus.

This is the Christian gospel. And although judgment is God's alien work without judgment if you do not believe judgment you do not believe the Christian gospel.

[ 21 : 23 ] And here is the thing that in all of scripture no one speaks about judgment more often or more clearly than Jesus Christ himself. Jesus Christ the heart of compassion the light of the world the one who's come to seek and to save the lost.

Christ and Jesus repeatedly teaches us that a day is coming when we will all appear before the judgment seat and that we will receive the consequences of our lives now and that those consequences will be eternal and that the judge who we face will be Jesus Christ himself and that his word will be final.

Just let me quote Jesus from Matthew 25. When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all his angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

Before him will be gathered all the nations and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats and he will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left and they will go into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.

They are the words of Jesus. Or in John chapter 5, the Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son. See, it's a basic tenet of pagan religion that it's God's job to forgive me.

[ 22 : 47 ] God is obligated to save me and to show mercy. But the Bible teaches that God, the God who made us and owned us and that all of us have rebelled against him and that we rightly deserve his judgment.

Now that we have sinned, all of us, God is neither bound nor obligated to show us mercy. All we can rightfully claim from God is justice.

He is not obligated to give us grace or pardon and that is what makes grace, grace. But somehow the idea persists that judgment is somehow unworthy of God.

But I want to say, what good is a God who won't deal with evil, who won't make a distinction between good and evil, or who's not powerful enough to do so?

What good is a God who won't make any moral distinction between a Mother Teresa and a Pol Pot? God, the basic fact of judgment gives great dignity to the smallest of our actions.

[ 23 : 57 ] It gives assurance to those of us who struggle with the problem of evil that one day God will establish his rule of shalom and peace and justice and righteousness.

History is not trapped in this endless and meaningless cycle of evil and injustice, but it is moving towards a definite goal. That the conflict of good and evil is not uncertain, but that God's will will be done.

That every knee will bow before the Lord Jesus Christ. It's what Christians have always believed.

That's what we confess together here, week by week by week. From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

Or in our communion service, he shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end. So here is what the plagues are about.

The plagues are pointing us to our own salvation. But there are so many roadblocks and so many barriers which keep us enslaved. They are sometimes imposed by ourselves when we try and play the little pharaoh in our lives.

[ 25 : 05 ] And sometimes they are imposed by others. But from the fourth plague onwards, God makes a clear distinction between his people and the people of Egypt.

And when he sends the plagues, they do not touch his own people. He brings them to salvation through the plagues. And that is exactly what Jesus Christ has done for us.

Jesus came from heaven for us. And every plague that I deserved, and every plague that you deserved, and every righteous judgment for sin that we deserved from God, he took in our place.

He was destroyed on the cross. He was destroyed so that we might not be. He suffered the darkness of God so that we might see the light. He suffered death so that we might live.

So you see, what is happening here is a great rehearsal. And if you are in Jesus Christ, when the plagues come, the plagues of final judgment, they will not touch you, because he has stood in your place.

[ 26 : 18 ] And he has brought you and me through the Red Sea, through the waters of baptism. He's brought us into the wilderness. And we are walking towards the promised land, the land of milk and honey, the land where we will be able to play.

And while his judgment, while God's judgment is his strange work, I really want you to see, it is in service of something greater, of our salvation, which is in service of something even greater, which is his own glory.

And if you have not come to Christ yet and you know you haven't, if you have not asked him to shelter you from God's righteous judgment, I urge you to do so. Because the time of grace and the time of opportunity is not infinitely elastic.

Have you asked him to save you from your sin, to free you from slavery? Have you said to him, take, please take my judgment upon yourself?

Have you softened your heart and faced the reality of judgment, confessed that he is Lord and begun to live with him as God of your life? So if you have, what God does is he takes all the judgments away and he puts in our heart a longing for that day, a future leaning forward longing, when every idol will be thrown down and when we will see him face to face, seated around the great table at the supper of the Lamb.

[ 27 : 52 ] And on that day, here's part of the song that we will sing. Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb. Amen. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.